

Chapter 09

You ever had a night where you just can't sleep? You know, when your mind won't shut up and there's nothing you can do about it?

Last night wasn't a problem. As soon as I got home from work, I was on the computer looking up the name Tristan gave me—yeah, yeah, someone else got it, but he saw to it I was sent the name. When I passed out, it was out of exhaustion.

Today, I was running on coffee. Work kept me busy, but nothing extraordinary. Testing the security of this or that company. Borderline 'keep busy' work, but it kept Tristan off my mind. Tonight, the plan was to sleep. I mean real proper sleep. I showered, ate; sent a couple of millionaires down the route to bankruptcy as a reward for supporting those China companies still using child labor people love so much because of how cheap they are.

I even stopped drinking coffee an hour before bed.

Well, drinking as much of it, so I could sleep anyway.

It didn't help.

Two hours later and I'm lying there, doing everything I can to not think of this hardon I've had since partway through my shower and that I can't do anything about. I always believed not jerking off was easy. I mean, it's just about not reaching down and jerking it.

Yeah, turns out, that's harder than you think, especially when your cock's already slick from soap. Getting myself to stop while in the shower was a lot harder than it had any right to be. Almost as hard as I was.

Still am.

Ah!

I am so funny.

Humping the mattress isn't jerking off, right?

Argh. Why didn't he just say I wasn't allowed to use my hands? At least then I'd know I could do this. Maybe work toward getting more flexible and sucking myself off. Maybe if I cum hand's free from a dildo up my ass, it won't count?

Ah man, I miss his cock.

I try to think of something else, but when I close my eyes, all I see is his muscular body. Not even sweaty as he grabs me and slams me against a wall, shoves his cock up—

Argh. Stop it.

I need to sleep.

Maybe I just need to work on the Mexico angle some more. Only I already got what I can off the net. For more, I need to break into one of their property.

Damn it, didn't I say I needed sleep?

And that isn't a 'me' thing anymore. It's a 'us' thing. We are going to go after them together. Me and him. We're a team. Bart and Tristan. No. Tristan and Bart; that's better. Where he goes, I go.

We will destroy the Fernan together.

I'm out of bed and in the kitchen. The coffee machine is going and the aroma of darkness is spreading. I catch myself humping the cupboard door and groan. I'm never going to last. Definitely won't survive this until the weekend. I don't even want to think of the friction of wearing pants.

I make my voice rough as Kat's office number rings. Once her voice mail message is over, I cough and start. "Kat? It's Bart. Sorry to do that, but I can't come in." I cough again. "I caught something. Must be all those hours I've been putting in. Overworked myself. I should have listened to you. Anyway. I'll call when I feel better."

I end the call and drink coffee from the carafe before filling the three travel mugs on the counter. Where are the others?

I gather mugs and fill them, then grab my laptop. As much as the plan is for us to never stop fucking once I'm there, Tristan has this thing he needs to deal with, so I'll have to stay busy and I can do that by handling whatever research he needs.

Then I'm in the SUV, and it's the feel of the leather seat against my skin that indicates I forgot a step.

I should get dressed.

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Doesn't that guy ever sleep?

He stands there in the middle of the dirt road, still wearing that AD/DC t-shirt, bathed in the morning light. Okay. Maybe he did sleep, and he's just an early bird. But don't they need like sixteen hours of sleep at that age?

I stop before hitting him, and I even lower the window before he's next to the car, all so we can get this over and I can be on my way to a blissful release. "Look," I tell Jacoby as he opens his mouth. "I know I'm not expected, but it isn't like I need to check in with you when I want to surprise Tristan with a visit."

The old man looks at me, unamused. "It's going to be quite the surprise, considering he isn't here."

"What do you mean, he isn't here? He has to be."

"You think that highly of you, don't you?" He doesn't smirk. I'll give him that.

"That's not what I mean. I need to see him. It's important." I need him to take care of me before my ails explode. Of course, it's my fault for assuming what he needed to deal with would keep him at him. I should have called, but— "what did you say?"

"I know love makes people stupid, but how about you pay attention?"

"Sure. What was that about him being gone a while?"

"Tristan called me yesterday and extended the delay before I destroy his place. If he doesn't call or return in a month, it's gone."

I'm going to ask who he thinks he is, that he has the right to talk about destroying my man's place, another time, because. "One month? I was supposed to visit this weekend."

Jacoby rests his hand on the door and leans forward. "Like I said. You think a lot of yourself.

You think a boy like you's going to keep his interest long?"

"You think an old man like you's going to keep his interest at all?" I reply in the same deadpan he used.

Jacoby laughs. It's the kind of laughs that, in a man his age, could kill. I hope it does. I even consider helping it along for implying I'm not important to Tristan.

Then he can breathe again, unfortunately. He grins. "I have no interest in him. Never cared for men. Me stealing him isn't something you need to worry about. Doesn't mean he cares about you, though. Men like him, they use you and move on."

"No." I look ahead, in the distance, fighting the urge to start singing 'I can't hear you' as loud as I can to drown his voice.

"You think he'd have left without telling you; if you mattered to him?"

"You have no idea how he feels about me," I snarl and gun it. I fishtail as soon as I have enough momentum. I hit a pothole and the crate of empty travel mugs tips off the front seat.

I give the man the finger as I drive by, picking up speed.

Tristan cares about me. Maybe he isn't capable of love, and I don't give a fuck about that. But he cares. He wouldn't have asked me to stay with him otherwise. Not in that tone, if there wasn't something special between us.

And if there isn't.

If he's playing me, the way Jacoby's implying, then I am going to make him regret thinking of me as a plaything. No one treats me that way.

I don't care how dear of a monster you are. You do not treat Alexander Bartholomew Crimson

like some ambulatory flashlight and expect to walk away from that.

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The closest town to the reservation is twenty buildings along the only road. There's nothing worth noting, other than one of those buildings is a Starbucks. That there's one here is impressive enough, but that it's open at six in the morning, with the sign telling me it's been open for half an hour, is mind-boggling. Those are big city hours. Who gets up this early in a town like this? Other than the barista?"

I drop the crate of mugs for him to refill and take a seat.

Okay. If he isn't here, where is he?

I pull the camera footage of the one place I know he'd got to, and I am reminded why he won't be going there. The cameras around his storage locker show me the rubble it still is.

Okay, if I don't have that as a starting point, let's start with him entering the city. There are only a few reasonable ways to reach Phoenix from the reservation. Highway sixty, the seventeen. If he wants to do the unexpected, he can take the three-oh-three to either Northern Parkway or the ten.

Instead, I catch sight of the Chevelle off a camera for the exit from the three-oh-three exit ramp to Happy Valley parkway, but not as he's exiting. As he's approaching it from the west. The sneaky bastard got off the sixty somewhere before the cameras start and used city roads. That's early afternoon on Monday.

Following him as he drives to North Mountain Village is easy. Once he's on foot, it's impossible. His car is parked for a few hours, then he drives to a Goodwill in the Promenade. He then drives back to the same parking spot in North Mountain Village and exits his car looking like a thug with the hoodie

up. I lose him again, and it's nearly an hour later when he comes back, gets in, and drives off. He turns into a street without cameras and... vanishes.

I take one of the mugs and replace it with an empty one as I ponder how that's even possible. I ignore the barista's annoyed look. It's not like he has anything else to do right now.

I go over every camera around that road, looking for even a taillight of the Chevelle. He never exited it.

Or rather, he never exited it on a road that has cameras. Every road has cameras, but that doesn't mean every inch of them is covered. There's a lot of Phoenix that doesn't have a camera looking at it, but to be able to drive through all of it in such a way that you're never picked up on even one.

That takes a lot of work.

That takes planning.

My heart sinks.

That takes not wanting me to be able to know where he is going.

I consider asking for the closest bar so I can drown my sorrow, but by the time I reach the counter, I'm too fucking pissed. I pay for the crate's worth of coffee and head out.

I mean something to him. I have to.

He fucking means everything to me.

I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for a guy like him, because I didn't know he was who I was waiting for until I met him. I am not letting him vanish like this just because he thinks he'd done with me.

Please stay. The need in those two words. The pain. There's no way he fakes that. He can't be that good. No one is that good. He wanted me to stay. Needed me by him.

Okay. So you know to avoid the city cameras, but this is the twenty-first century. There is no way you can avoid big brother knowing where you are. I access the US's defense network and look for whichever satellite was over Phoenix on Monday.

None of them.

You have got to be kidding me.

How can there not be one American satellite over the city? Okay, so who else might be spying on us?

Russia, really? It couldn't be our neighbors to the north? No, it had to be a country I never hacked into before.

The only time I might have been interested in hacking them was when the clown was elected, but I'd have to care about politics for that.

Fuck, there's no way I can get in there on this laptop. I got into the US system because I gave myself access, the first time I hacked them. It was to test my home system.

Okay, fine. We're doing it this way and fuck him realizing I cloned his phone during my visit so I'd have his number. I take out mine and enter his number from memories.

I know entire programs by heart. Memorizing a ten-digit number is child's play.

I stare at them with my finger over the send button.

His phone is an old flip phone, but just how old is it? It could be decades old. A quick search tells me it could be as old as the late eighties. Yes, I can clone a phone that old. And all I wanted was his

number. What did I care if I didn't get anything else off it? GPS was introduced to phones in the late nineties, maybe the early aughts. Could his old phone not be too old?

Only one way to find out.

His number gives me the provider, then, because I already have access there, I use the police's network to convince the provider to give me the coordinates of that phone. I just get numbers, and I plug them into Google. The phone is outside Amarillo, Texas. That's easy then. I get on the forty, and I'll catch up to him.

He needs to sleep, eventually, while I have coffee.

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Red and blue lights come on into the darkness behind me and I finish draining the mug before putting it back in the crate. I so don't need the delay. I look ahead as far as the high beams will let me see and imagine Tristan gaining distance on me again. I close the laptop and slip it under the passenger seat. It's better if they don't realize I was driving distracted on top of going way too fast for their liking.

How much will the ticket be? What state am I even in? I take five hundred out of my wallet as someone exits the police car.

Come on already. I have the time to dig through the crate for a filled mug and take a long drink, then wonder if this is the last one. When did I get them refilled? It was light when I did.

I remember to lower the window as they reach the SUV.

"Good evening, sir," the woman in uniform says. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Sorry, but I wasn't keeping track." I offer her the bills. "Is that going to cover it?"

"Excuse me?" she looks at what I'm holding in confusion.

Really? It's not that difficult. "Is this enough to cover whatever the ticket will come to? I'm in a hurry and I'd rather give it to you to deal with so I can get going. I don't have the time for you to write it up."

"Sir, are you trying to bribe me?" She shines her flashlight in the car.

"No, that's illegal," I said with a sigh. "What I'm trying to do is play preemptively. I really don't care what you decide to do with the money."

"What's in those?" The light is on the crate.

"Coffee." I put the money between my legs and grab a mug, take a sip, then unscrew the top. She looked in and sniffs it.

"That is a lot of coffee."

"I have a long way to go. Can we move this along?"

"Registration and Driver's license, please." She says in a frosty tone.

"Really?" I ask in disbelief.

"Sir, if you're in a hurry, I suggest you comply. It will go faster." She looks at my face in the indirect light. "Although I suspect you could do with sleep."

"I'm good." I hand over my license and the registration. "I have plenty of coffee."

She walks back to her car, and I put the laptop on my lap. Her lights should keep her from noticing the glow of the screen.

Tristan is still on the outside of Memphis, as he's been for the last two hours. At least it's not compounding this delay. It just means I'm going to have to drive a little faster to make it up, instead of a lot.

I put it away, and look through the crates for a mug that isn't empty, and it's hard enough finding one I know I'm going to have to make yet another stop.

Fuck.

She returns and hands me my license and the registration, then her pad. "Please sign here. By signing, you are not admitting to any guilt, simply acknowledging receipt of the ticket." I return it and she pulls out the sheets. On its back, she circles something. "That's the number you can call to arrange payment. If you want to fight it, you fill out this section and—"

I snicker. "You really think I can talk my way out of this? How fast was I going, anyway?"

"A hundred and three," she says flatly.

"That feels right." I take the ticket. "Do you need anything else from me?"

"No, sir." I can see that there is so much more she'd like to say. "Please drive carefully."

"No worries there."

I accelerate gently to the speed limit, then keep to that for five minutes. Long enough to confirm she isn't following me with her lights off. It's probably illegal, but it's what I'd do. Then I'm off, leveling at one-ten so I can make up the time she cost me.

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The pain in my chest forces my eyes open.

Why am I angled? What the fuck happened? I was driving and now I'm... I look around and can make out gravel and grass from the passenger window in the reflected headlights. How did I end up in the ditch, and why am I stopped? Fuck, I don't have the time for this.

At least it's still night, so this can't cost me too much time.

There's a knock on the window and I reach for the gun between the seats. It isn't there. Where did it go? The knock comes again, and I lower it.

"Fancy meeting you again, Mister Crimson," a woman says, and I make out the uniform in the reflected light.

"Aren't you outside your jurisdiction?" I asked with a sigh.

"No. I caught you speeding as you entered it. If you'd waited a mile before crashing, you'd have been out of it. As it is, you get to see me again."

"At least I don't need to hand my stuff over again. How much is this going to be?"

"Why don't we start by seeing if you can get back on the road?"

I give it gas and I see grass and soil fly behind me, but I don't move. Once I stop, she walks around, shining her light down. She pauses on the passenger side front and her expression isn't comforting.

"You're not going anywhere," she tells me once she's at my side. "The passenger side front wheels bent. You might have snapped the axle."

"Fuck. I so don't have the time for this."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to make the time."

I stare at her. "Did I say that out loud?"

"You did. Normally I'd write you up for this, but seeing as I already gave you a ticket, I'd be willing to overlook it, *if* you let me drive you to the motel six and sleep. I don't think you're in a position to deny needing it anymore. I'm going to call Ralph and he'll tow this to the garage. They open at nine."

"Tell them to keep it. Is there a dealership around here?"

“There is, Wilbur’s. But he opens at nine too.”

I eye her suspiciously. “What you’re saying is that there’s no way I’m getting out of that sleep.”

She smiles. “Unless you want to walk where you’re going, yes, you’re going to have to sleep.”

“Fuck.”

Can I get a car delivered? I’m out of Arizona, so the Crimsons don’t have a depot close by. I sigh in defeat.

“Let me get my stuff.” It’s a good thing the laptop was still under the seat, since the crate falling would have broken it. I pull it up. Dump as many of the mugs as I can back in, then take the laptop, shutting it down before straightening.

“That much coffee can’t be healthy for you,” she says, taking the crate from me before I extricate myself.

“Trust me.” I take the crate back before she can leave with it. “You don’t want to see me off the stuff. I get murderous.”

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